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Glück, Tobias M ; Maercker, Andreas

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Torture as negative excessive behaviour of revenge and punishment

Andreas Maercker and Tobias Glück

Division of Psychopathology and Clinical Intervention,
University of Zurich

Correspondence:
Andreas Maercker, PhD MD

Department of Psychology
Division of Psychopathology & Clinical Intervention
University of Zurich
Binzmühlestr. 14, Box 17
CH - 8050 Zurich
Switzerland
Tel. ++41 44 635 7310
maercker@psychologie.uzh.ch
www.psychologie.uzh.ch/psypath/

In German-speaking psychology, for the last two decades, several successful research traditions on the psychology of revenge and punishment. They have provided insights into topics such as retributive justice and social discrimination or social punishment. In the following, recent studies will be summarized, followed by a research agenda on revenge phenomena and implications for future research.

Retributive justice

From a retributive justice viewpoint, revenge, aggression, and punishment are imposed upon an offender as a response to his or her prior unfair behaviour (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009). This may take place at the workplace, within families, in legal procedures or societal negotiation processes. In an experiment, Gollwitzer and Denzler (2009) aimed to answer the following research question: Do persons who are able to perform revenge (“avenger”) want to see the punished person (“offender”) suffer, or do they want to deliver a message to him or her through their punishment (e.g., “This is the price you have to pay for transgression”)? The authors tested this alternative hypothesis through an implicit measure of momentary emotions. (The authors partially used other terminology because of their broader theoretical embedding/derivations in motivation and goal theory).

In a behavioural experiment (a stock market game on a computer), the prospective offender and the prospective avenger played against each other for money without direct contact. After being “offended”, the avenger was given the possibility to torture the offender by having him involuntarily watch, and describe in written form, a series of very unpleasant or disgusting pictures. Some of the avengers then received apparent messages from the “torture victims”, such as “I see that I had to look at these disgusting pictures...that’s the price I have to pay for having been unfair”.

The findings of the experiment showed that the avengers felt better when their torture was perceived as a message. Avengers in the no-message condition even had increased aggressiveness scores. One implication of the experiment is that in normative retributive justice constellations, the delivery of a message seems to be the goal of the punishment. We will discuss below how this may be related to behaviours in real tortures in notorious institutions.

Social discrimination and punishment

Social discrimination research argues that aggressive behaviour (e.g., torture) towards outsiders aims at achieving higher-order goals such as demonstrating power and, to a lesser degree, specific goals, such as delivering a message. One main objective of this research is to explore the conditions for acceptance of discriminatory or aggressive behaviour. Kessler, Neumann, Mummendey, Bertold, Schubert and Waldus (2010) focused on two types of standards of evaluation for accepting torture as a possible behaviour towards pretend deviants.

People who perceive a scaled (“maximal”) standard of evaluation should assign punishment according to the degree of deviation, whereas people who are guided by a shrinkage (“minimal”) standard should punish uniformly regardless of the degree of deviation. In addition, the authors assumed that orientation to minimal standards may correlate with effortless processing of contextual information—while orientation to scaled standards may map onto effortful processing.

In a series of four studies, they manipulated, for example, the type of standard (shrunk or scaled) and the degree of deviation (from very close to very distant from a forbidden object). The results typically showed significant interaction effects between the type of evaluation standard and deviant behaviour. People judging deviants relative to minimal or shrunk

standards do not care about the deviation from the standard and therefore assign punishment according to whether this standard is met or violated. In contrast, people judging deviants relative to scaled standards care about the degree of deviation and therefore assign punishment according to the degree of deviation. Moreover, Kessler et al. (2010) showed that the type of standards can be assessed as interindividual differences or manipulated by framing or mindset priming procedures. To manipulate mindsets, in their fourth experiment, the authors used very abstract means (a cartoon mouse in a maze).

What the four experiments tell us about punishment in social contexts seems evident, and may be even more obvious for “professional tortures”. The authors’ empirical link to manipulation or framing of mindsets opens up a supplementary perspective that will be shortly addressed below.

Psychopathological revenge phenomena

Research in our own lab focuses on revenge phenomena in broader clinical contexts. We begin with a case description that received maximum attention in the Zurich region some years ago. The case concerns the father of two children who were killed in an airplane crash close to Lake Constance in Southern Germany in 2002, in which a total of 71 people, mainly children, lost their lives. A father from the Caucasus Republic of Ossetia, who lost his wife and two children in the crash, sought out the control tower operators who were made responsible in the press for failing to regulate the air traffic on the night in question, consequently leading to the airplane crash. The father found out the name and address of the control tower operator on duty that night, went to his house, confronted him with the words “you are the murderer of my sons and wife”, and killed him. After serving his prison sentence for several years, the father then returned to North Ossetia, where he was enthusiastically received as a “brave man” and was immediately appointed to a high-ranking position in the public administration.

This case report may direct attention towards some essential aspects in the area considered here. First, revenge or excessive aggressiveness is often related to a previously experienced loss, threat or victimization. Second, cultural-bound mindsets or mentalities are overt predictors of revenge or punishment behaviours, as it can be assumed that a Central European father would have had stronger inhibitions against carrying out such an act.

Gäbler and Maercker (2011) proposed a hypothetical model on victimization-related revenge phenomena based on a range of different theoretical approaches to revenge phenomena. In the context of negative excessive behaviour, one piece of the model deserves closer attention. The most important moderators of the relationship between one’s own victimization and either revenge or forgiveness are assumed to be self-esteem or self-efficacy in societies that hold modern value orientations (compared to traditional values in the case reported). Revenge is regarded as a reaction to transgression that is motivated by the desire to strengthen one’s self-worth. One prediction of the model is to show that the processing of one’s own victimization with low levels of self-esteem or self-efficacy will predict higher rates of revenge phenomena (e.g., thoughts, feelings, acts). By contrast, if self-esteem or self-efficacy are high, people are assumed to exhibit forgiveness (Eaton et al., 2006).

In a long-term study of political prisoners and torture victims (N=93) from the former East Germany, we are currently examining these assumptions. Study participants have been followed for up to 40 years; 15 years prospectively after the political changes of 1989 plus an average of 25 years retrospectively (Maercker, O’Neill, Gäbler, Schützwohl & Müller, submitted). Their revenge attitudes are at lower levels than in the sample case, but are still substantial (Gäbler & Maercker, 2011). They rated highest on “fantasize about getting back at the perpetrator” and lowest on actual behaviour (“ever taken steps to take revenge”). In previous research, we had already shown that elevated anger levels in this victimized group had strong relationships with their posttraumatic psychopathology ($r = .52$) as well as an

inverse relationship with their social integration ($r = .35$) (Schützwohl & Maercker, 2000). The latter finding led us to conclude that there are social or societal means to prevent these violent behaviours.

Summary and implications

The illustrated research shows very different frames of reference to approach negative excessive behaviours of torture, punishment and revenge. Our goal was to demonstrate how these approaches might all inform a more comprehensive investigation of torturers or perpetrators.

1. One contribution of the first strand of research is to further explore whether torturers at least partially draw satisfaction from their deeds by delivering a message to their actual, individual victim—or in contrast, whether they do not depend on this interpersonal “exchange”. In the latter case, it would be plausible to assume that they get their positive rewards by being a member of an in-group of torture-prone professionals.
2. The second piece of research mainly indicates that interindividual differences in more or less automatized standards of evaluation may lead to ease of conducting torture. One extra finding needs further investigation, namely, that interindividual differences in mindsets for torturing are easy to manipulate.
3. The third reported research agenda seems, on the surface, to be very far from explaining predictors of torture, since it deals with trauma victims. Nevertheless, the case example showed that excess aggression is a far-reaching phenomenon in these persons. Our own research agenda emphasizes the role of self-esteem in persons who may turn from victims into perpetrators. In our own research agenda, we will include all previously named factors (i.e., giving somebody a message, reference to standards, interaction with self-esteem) in order to test further hypotheses on negative excessive behaviours.

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